

Number of public workers planning to retire hits record N/H 6-27-11

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COLUMBUS — Several retirement systems for public workers in Ohio are seeing a spike in retirement applications as experienced employees seek to leave amid a political climate that many of them view as unfavorable, with state officials working to limit employees' collective bargaining rights and make pension changes.

Three of Ohio's retirement systems for government employees and other public workers, including the two largest, have set records for retirement applications, The Columbus Dispatch reported Sunday. The totals increased 10 percent in the past year for teachers, 24 percent for other school workers, 50 percent for the State Highway patrol and 35 percent for workers in the Public Employees Retirement System.

Officials at some of the systems said that the cause isn't clear, but some have said there are obvious factors.

"We do not record why people decide to retire, but it seems to be a perfect storm of (aging) baby boomers and anxiety around pension reform and other state budget-related changes," Tim Barbour, senior communication coordinator for the School Employees Retirement System of Ohio, told the newspaper.

Some workers feel pressured because the Republican-led Legislature and first-term Gov. John Kasich passed a law that bans public employee strikes and restricts collective bargaining rights for more than 350,000 teachers, police officers, state employees and others.

"They are afraid not to retire," said Jim Spillman, a corrections officer at Marion Correctional Institute who, at 55, has worked in the prison system for 34 years but plans to leave. "Not that they are ready to retire — they are able — but they are afraid of what they may

lose."

That was true for Janet Wilson, a Columbus special education teacher who retired last month.

"I love the kids and I love my job, but I want to retire with a decent living," said Wilson, 56. "There are a lot of people feeling the same way. I've had a lot of teachers say to me that if they could retire, they would because they feel the times are uncertain."

The departures don't appear to be as common among firefighters and police officers, but that could change if the collective bargaining bill remains law, said William Estabrook, executive director of the Ohio Police & Fire Pension Fund. Opponents of that measure have been collecting petition signatures to get the issue on the ballot and let voters decide whether to keep the law.

"If it does not get overturned, my prediction is we will have a rush to the door," Estabrook told the Dispatch. Such a rush, he said, could hurt communities that might lose multiple veteran emergency responders who are deeply familiar with the people and places among which they work.

Other public agencies also may share concerns about the loss of institutional knowledge with a large exodus of veteran workers.

"Any employer would be worried about brain drain," said Karen Carraher, interim executive director of PERS.

Republican state Rep. Kirk Schuring of Canton, who leads a panel developing pension changes, said he hopes workers don't use misinformation or unfinished proposals to make career decisions.

"We've tried purposefully in our timeline to prevent a rush to the door," he said, noting that lawmakers hope to avoid a situation in which workers' retirement benefits would change quickly and drastically.